

RADIOHEAD

The King Of Limbs

XL. VINYL/CD/DOWNLOAD. OUT NOW

★★★★

Their eighth, and most understated, studio album.



LIKE THIS? TRY THIS...



CAN

Future Days

UNITED ARTISTS, 1973

★★★★

The German adventurers' last album with frontman Damo Suzuki was also their most restful and spacious, flooded with air and sunlight.



TALK TALK

Spirit Of Eden

EMI, 1988

★★★★★

Mark Hollis and Tim Friese-Greene's retreat from pop is a quiet masterpiece with a unique, otherworldly mystique. Hugely influential, pioneering post-rock.



FLYING LOTUS

Cosmogramma

WARP, 2010

★★★★

A fidgety, unpredictable tour of hip hop, jazz and techno with occasional guest vocalists including one Thom Yorke.

These days Radiohead don't just release records; they spring ambushes. Last month, they managed to

condense the whole hype cycle, from rumour to reception, into a five-day flash of activity which generated an overnight online cottage industry of remixes, mash-ups, cover versions and feverish discussion. As anyone with an internet connection, a spare £6 and the faintest interest in Radiohead will already know, this subtle, slender album was an unlikely vessel for so much attention – a very public outing for a very private record. At the last minute, the band cancelled a launch event in the Shibuya district of Tokyo due to fears over crowd safety, an idea that is almost impossible to square with the slippery clatter of opening song Bloom. Imagine how bad you'd feel if you'd trampled a fellow fan to the Tokyo pavement for a record that sounded a bit like Four Tet.

The King Of Limbs makes cavernous the gap between where Radiohead are and where, according to the laws of rock gravity, they should be. When In Rainbows came out in 2007, industry pundits pondered what other bands could learn from its surprise release and honesty-box pricing. The truth is: not much. It worked because it was Radiohead, the world's one and only officially designated Serious Rock Band, uniquely worthy of the listener's patience, and where they lead nobody else can really follow.

The question that lurks unanswered within The King Of Limbs is what they should do with such extraordinary artistic privilege.

Contrary to the promotional photograph opposite, this is not their folk record, though it is interested in nature. And contrary to the Lotus Flower video, in which a cowering Thom Yorke spawned (as he must have predicted) dozens of YouTube spoofs, it's not a particularly physical record, though it is in thrall to the rhythms of producers such as the aforementioned Four Tet, Caribou and Flying Lotus. Basically, it sounds like Radiohead. After the giant leaps and bold reversals of their career so far, the surprise this time is that there is no surprise.

It's a longstanding Radiohead tradition to talk about the blood, sweat and tears spilled over each album but The King Of Limbs – intimate, opaque, slow-burning, almost perversely low-key – feels like it was made under minimal pressure and, if anything, might be an attempt to deliberately downsize expectations. Rather than being experimental, it absorbs and refines the results of previous

experiments. The kind of complex, processed rhythms that used to seem stiff and alienating (not a criticism, by the way) are now lithe and fluid, with bassist Colin Greenwood the record's quiet hero. The flocking strings and woodwind which dive and then ascend midway through Bloom are utterly gorgeous, even if the overall effect is so understated that it makes Everything In Its Right Place sound like Swedish House Mafia.

Running to just eight tracks and 37 minutes, The King Of Limbs can't afford any filler and it loses ground in the first half with Feral and Morning, Mr Magpie, which combines the goading anger ("You've got some nerve coming here") and dislocated nursery rhymes ("Good morning, Mr Magpie, how are we today?") of Yorke's early '00s work to an almost self-parodic degree. Frequently, the first half sounds like a more supple follow-up to Yorke's The Eraser, barely sounding like the work of a five-man band at all.

It's tempting to see the album as two twinned EPs, because the second half is a different entity in which the band, to quote one song, "unfurl as lotus flowers". The sinister undertones of Morning, Mr Magpie and Little By Little drain away; the lyrics teem with trees, birds and water. For anyone who equates Yorke with apocalyptic gloom, the sonorous piano ballad Codex can be heard as an invitation to suicide but it could just as easily be about a refreshing swim, segueing into the backwoods reverie of Give Up The Ghost in a warm mist of birdsong. The closing Separator is positively idyllic, with the guitar tracing Balearic shapes around the skipping, Can-like groove as Yorke sighs, "Wake me up". Where Hail To The Thief was at war with the

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world, this, even more so than In Rainbows, is the music Radiohead make once the smoke has cleared – escapist, reflective, profoundly beautiful avant-garde pastoral that's spiritually akin to Talk Talk's Spirit Of Eden. As Yorke sings on Codex, "No one gets hurt".

This is why The King Of Limbs is both a very good record and a disappointment. Leaving aside the drama of its arrival, it's not a major statement in either commercial or artistic terms. Radiohead's ambitions here are so modest that it's hard to tell whether this is just creative throat-clearing (it's not impossible they'll have sprung another album on us by the time you read this) or the quieter path they've settled for. If it's the latter, well, Radiohead sound calmer and more content than ever, but will their audience feel the same, and will they be quite as patient next time around? People will forgive the world's official Serious Rock Band anything at all, except predictability. DORIAN LYNSKEY

DOWNLOAD: Bloom // Little By Little // Lotus Flower
Q 50 // Codex // Separator



Radiohead: their
Countryfile audition
wasn't going well.